The importance of holistic assessment –
A nursing student perspective

Sonya Wallace, Bachelor of Nursing Science (first year)
School of Nursing and Midwifery
University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

Holistic patient assessment is used in nursing to inform the nursing process and provide the foundations of patient care. Through holistic assessment, therapeutic communication, and the ongoing collection of objective and subjective data, nurses are able to provide improved person-centred care to patients. A holistic approach acknowledges and addresses the physiological, psychological, sociological, developmental, spiritual and cultural needs of the patient. This article briefly explores the importance of the developmental, spiritual and cultural aspects of holistic assessment and how these can be incorporated into the nursing process. The leadership role of nurses in achieving holistic care of patients, patient safety and positive patient outcomes is also discussed.

The crucial role of holistic assessment in nursing care

Patient assessment is an important nursing skill and provides the foundations for both initial and ongoing patient care. A comprehensive, holistic assessment is the first step of the nursing process and the assessment informs decisions on nursing diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation (Luxford 2012). It is a vital step, as the information gathered during the assessment determines the initial phases of nursing care (Luxford 2012). There are six aspects of holistic assessment; physiological, psychological, sociological, developmental, spiritual and cultural and the assessment stage of the process is a data-gathering phase, where the nurse collects both subjective and objective data from the patient and when appropriate, their family (Luxford 2012). This essay will discuss the overall importance of holistic health assessment and specifically explore the assessment of patient’s developmental, spiritual and cultural needs and how nurses incorporate those needs into a person-centred approach to holistic nursing care.
Holistic assessment can be used to assess either individual or family health care needs depending on the circumstances. The nursing process has five stages; assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation, and has been used in Australia since the 1980’s providing a universal, systematic approach to nursing care (Luxford 2012). The nursing process supports a coordinated approach to health care with a focus on optimum patient outcomes, patient safety and evidence-based practice (Luxford 2012). The first and arguably most important phase begins with an assessment of the biopsychosocial and spiritual aspects of the patient’s life and the impact these may have on patient recovery and, in specific settings such as in critical care units, how these aspects may include and affect the patient’s family (Morton & Fontaine 2009).

A comprehensive approach incorporates the six aspects of holistic assessment rather than focusing solely on the physical, and it forms a more complete framework for nursing diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation (Fennessey & Wittmann-Price 2011, p. 45). A holistic approach is further recommended as nurses have a leadership role in ensuring person-centred patient care, rather than ‘medical-problem’ centred care (Alfaro-LeFevre 2010; Levett-Jones & Bourgeois 2011).

Assessment is described as constant and cyclic, re-visited throughout the nursing process to gauge effectiveness of care, evaluate patient improvement or identify patient deterioration as early as possible, and to identify the need for further reassessment or escalation of care (Luxford 2012). Therefore competency in holistic assessment is crucial to successful nursing care planning and maximising positive patient outcomes (Bolster & Manias 2010). The importance of holistic assessment is further reinforced by several of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC) National Competency Standards for the Registered Nurse, such as Competency 5.1 ‘uses relevant evidence-based assessment framework to collect data about the physical, socio-cultural and mental health of the individual/group’ (ANMC 2006, p. 5). As part of the interdisciplinary healthcare team, the nurse communicates with a range of professionals to facilitate and deliver quality patient care as stated in ANMC Competency 9.2 ‘communicates effectively with individuals/groups to facilitate provision of care’ (ANMC 2006, p. 11). Most importantly, nurses have a duty of care to patients, and a comprehensive assessment will enhance patient safety and
accuracy of health care decision-making as reinforced in ANMC Competency 1.2 ‘performs nursing interventions following comprehensive and accurate assessments’ (ANMC 2006, p. 2).

As part of holistic assessment, developmental assessment can assist in making better informed, evidence-based patient care decisions by determining the person’s physical, behavioural, cognitive and social developmental stage (Weber 2005). There are several developmental theorists, and two of the most commonly cited in nursing are Erik Erikson and Jean Paiget. Erikson focuses on the psychosocial aspects of development and Paiget on cognitive development (Baldwin & Bentley 2012). Familiarisation with these theories allows the nurse to assess a person’s physical, cognitive and social behaviour and identify deficits, deviations from the norm or developmental delays (Weber 2005).

Knowledge of stages of development is useful in assessing neonates, infants, children and young adults, particularly physical milestones, norms and measurements, and in older patients, the theories can be applied to assess personality, cognitive and coping abilities (Baldwin & Bentley 2012). Subjective data can be obtained through observation and by interviewing the person about their health history, childhood and family history (Baldwin & Bentley 2012). Family members can also provide subjective data which will help build a more holistic nursing care plan.

Objective data may include measurements of weight, height, cognitive and physical functionality (Weber 2005). Gathering data using a range of techniques is also a nursing competency as stated in ANMC Competency 5.2 ‘uses a range of data gathering techniques including observation, interview, physical examination and measurement to obtain a nursing history and assessment’ (ANMC 2006, p. 5). Developmental assessment is important because the person’s stage of social and cognitive development will affect how they respond to a particular health event and may extend to how their family responds, which in turn may impact back upon the patient (Jones & Creedy 2008).

Spirituality is another important aspect of holistic assessment. When assessing a person’s spiritual beliefs and values nurses have the opportunity to demonstrate respect for the patient’s views and
values as stated in ANMC Competency 9.5 ‘demonstrates sensitivity, awareness and respect in regard to an individual’s/group’s spiritual needs’ (ANMC 2006, p. 7). Spirituality is highly personal and can be complex to define and different for each person (Dossey, Keegan & Guzzetta 2005; Lindsay 2012). Despite this, nurses should feel confident about their own values and in raising the subject of spirituality with patients as part of their assessment for inclusion in a nursing care program that is encompassing of mind, body and spirit.

Nurses have a key role in ensuring patients feel comfortable in discussing their spiritual needs and views in an open, non-judgemental and supportive environment as spirituality often provides an important framework for patient’s to work through difficult decisions and confront difficult outcomes (Lindsay 2012). By having a strong spiritual base and their spiritual needs met, patients who are facing difficult issues are supported and their spirituality may help shape their decision-making processes (Weber 2005). Nurses also need to be aware of a patient’s spiritual practices such as prayer or bible studies and how these might affect the daily nursing care routine for the person.

As part of the initial assessment of the patient, the nurse can enquire about the spiritual support the patient may need, whether from within the health care system, for example arranging for a hospital chaplain visit, or from the community, by arranging a visit from the patient’s local minister. Spiritual needs can also be assessed through questioning and active listening, and through observation of religious symbols or artefacts in the person’s room (Lindsay 2012). It is important for nurses to actively support patients’ spiritual needs as evidence shows spirituality can help patients readjust to physical changes following events such as cerebrovascular accidents through providing a sense of connectedness, hope and strength to face the future (Joanna Briggs Institute 2009). In a critical care setting patients are often facing the potential loss of life and families are facing the possible loss of a loved one and there is an opportunity in this situation to bring spirituality to the fore. It is the nurse’s role to be open and supportive, to communicate patient needs to the multidisciplinary health care team to assist in coordinating referral services to support the patient and their families through crisis situations as required (Morton & Fontaine 2009).
Cultural awareness and understanding of how culture impacts on a person’s health is another aspect of providing a holistic nursing assessment. Cultural beliefs can have a significant impact on people’s health and nurses have a responsibility to be aware of each individual patient’s cultural context to ‘ensure practice is sensitive and supportive of cultural issues’ ANMC Competency 5.1 (ANMC 2006, p. 5). Cultural safety and cultural competency are important components of undergraduate nursing degrees in many countries demonstrating the growing importance of this approach (Kardong-Edgren & Campinha-Bacote 2008; Barnes & Rowe 2010). When caring for patients, cultural cues may be evident through family dynamics, ritual, values, beliefs, understanding and social behaviour.

Discussing cultural beliefs in an initial assessment may identify the need for a more in-depth interview into cultural elements and how they might affect diet, family networks, health contexts and attitudes toward the patient’s personal space and patient contact by the health care team (Dossey, Keegan & Guzzetta 2005). Effective, respectful and appropriate therapeutic communication is important when caring for all patients, including when caring for patients from different cultural backgrounds. Therapeutic communication forms the basis of a comprehensive holistic assessment. Ensuring communication is appropriate to the person is an important part of collaborative and therapeutic practice as evidenced by ANMC Competency 9, ‘establishes, maintains and appropriately concludes therapeutic relationships’ (ANMC 2006, p. 7). Awareness of a patient’s cultural beliefs is an important part of holistic assessment.

In conclusion, registered nurses have a leadership role in ensuring holistic patient care which focuses on evidence-based professional practice, patient safety and positive patient outcomes. This begins with an initial assessment of the patient and continues throughout the patient’s length of stay in hospital or if in the community, contact with the local community nurse. An initial holistic patient assessment combined with constant review is foundational in developing a complete and ongoing nursing care plan. Developing excellent communication skills and assessment competency is vital for nurses to deliver high-quality health care to patients and this can be achieved by including all six aspects of holistic assessment into the first stage of the nursing process.
The importance of holistic assessment: 
A nursing student perspective

Sonya Wallace

References


Alfaro-LeFevre, R 2010, Applying the nursing process: a tool for critical thinking, 7th edn, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, PA.


Barnes, M & Rowe, J 2010, Child, youth and family health: strengthening communities, Elsevier Australia, NSW.


Dossey, B, Keegan, L & Guzzetta, C 2005, Pocket guide for holistic nursing, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, US.


The importance of holistic assessment:  
A nursing student perspective  

Sonya Wallace


Morton, P & Fontaine, D 2009, Critical care nursing: a holistic approach, 9th edn, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins PA.

Weber, J 2005, Nurses’ handbook of health assessment, 5th edn, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, PA.